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AUTHOR Col, Jeanne-Marie
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ABSTRACT

Group interviews were found to be a liberating research methodology when used in a study to determine the views of 1,000 secondary school girls in Uganda concerning family life and work. A liberating method of interviewing has the following characteristics: it is nonexploitative, the subjects have some control over the situation, there is two-way communication, research questions are meaningful to subjects, and a diversity of viewpoints are examined. In addition to group interviews, data were collected through questionnaires and post-interview question and answer sessions. Research findings showed that 92 percent of the women intend to have children, but only 87 percent want to get married. In terms of work, 87 percent plan to work after marriage; 85 percent want jobs that require training beyond secondary schools. The advantages of using group interviews were many. For example, explanations as well as descriptions were obtained. There was a measure of external validity, because the researchers could see within groups how much a particular opinion was shared. Also, the women learned about themselves from the process. (RM)

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Jeanne-Marie Col
Public Administration Program
Sangamon State Univerrity

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INTERVIEWING WOMEN IN GROUPS:

A LIBERATING METHODOLOGY

It's appropriate that we should be discussing women in Uganda today, March 8, since it is International Women's Day. We couldn't have planned a better day.

By way of background, I went to Uganda in 1972. This was just after experience with conscious raising groups and the beginning of the "1960's women's movement" in the United States. I had a lot of ideas about what I thought would be good ways for people to relate to each other. And, I decided to try out these ideas in a research situation by interviewing women in groups. I will describe what I think a liberating research methodology should be, comparing it with ordinary survey research. Then I will tell about my study, talk about the advantages and disadvantages of interviewing women in groups, and then discuss situations in which I think this kind of methodology is most applicable.

First of all, what are the characteristics of a liberating methodology? Traditional survey research interviewing has the following characteristics: (1) Usually you have a very brief encounter with "subjects" (in social science research the term "subjects" is conventional. I will use that terminology today, in keeping with conventional social science. It places the respondent in a lower and subordinate position vis-a-vis the researcher. I object to that placement.) (2) Usually the situation is highly structured. (3) Usually the social scientist has control over the interviewing situation. (4) The social scientist wants to create distance between herself and the subject. (5) There is also a focus on theoretical importance rather than importance to the individual with which your doing the interview. (6) There is also, I think, an over emphasis on objectivity and the consequent loss of a number of the more human aspects of the interaction. (7) There is also a tendency to over simplify the results in order to be theoretically clear. (8) Also, there is a sense in which you take information from the respondents but you give them nothing in return.

What should be the characteristics of a liberating method of interviewing? (1) First of all, it would be as nonexploitative as possible. In particular the interviewer would give as well as receive in the process. (2) Also, the subjects should have some control over the situation. They shouldn't be completely passive. (3) Third, there should be two-way communication between the subject and the social scientist. (4) Fourth, the research questions should be as meaningful to the subjects as they are to the theoreticians. In other words, if I were to explain my study to a subject, my explanation should be understandable. The language I use, the concepts I use, should mean something to the subjects involved in the study. (5) In addition, we should strive for complexity and diversity of viewpoints in understanding this situation. (6) Finally, the interviewing situation should not be too different from the ordinary life situation of the subjects. They should not be pulled too far out of the context of their own lives. If they are in their own context, they will not feel as alienated from the interviewing situation itself.

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About the study itself - I did a survey of approximately 1,000 secondary school girls in Uganda. We included eight senior secondary schools. I interviewed at least 50% or more of the girls in each of the eight schools. Half of those schools were single-sex schools. The other half were coeducational. I will be happy to answer some questions about that later. It seems to me very important whether ~~the girls are~~ in single-sex schools or coeducational schools, and I hadn't appreciated the importance of single-sex schools until my experience in Uganda.

I trained research staff who were very similar to the subjects to be studied. I hired freshman university women. They helped me to design the questions and then we all administered the questions together. The interviewers were very, very close to the people involved. I also had a political perspective. I wanted not only to understand the women, but I actually wanted to influence their lives as well. My research assistants agreed with my feminist political perspective. My research assistants were very excited about the project, that political purpose permeated the research throughout. We were objective in our data gathering, but we knew that our presence and our questions would influence the lives of our subjects.

About the tools that we used specifically. The group interview came in the middle of the research process. When we were in a secondary school for about a week: at the beginning we handed out self-administered Questionnaires to 50% or more of the women there (randomly selected from lists; internal sampling). We had about five pages of questions which they answered by themselves. English is a language which is used in the secondary schools and posed no problem. Then, from those who had filled out the Questionnaire we chose about half to participate in the group interviews. We stratified them by their year in school so that we could achieve somewhat homogeneous groups. We did not try to make them homogeneous in terms of tribe or social class. But, we put the first year's together, the second year's together, etc.

Then we had the group interviews in which there were six to eight women and usually one or two of the researchers. We would just sit around and talk for an hour or so. It was somewhat structured in the sense that we had questions and hypothetical situations to start the discussion. Whenever we finished completely what everyone wanted to say on any particular question, we would then go on to another one. We did not have a tape recorder. That would be very useful, but we didn't have them. We were frantically copying down the discussion, the conclusions, something about the body language that was going on. We took down as much as we could. Had we had a tape recorder we could have concentrated on manually recording nonverbal behaviors. We had trouble ending the sessions, naturally. We would finish our questions but they wanted to keep talking. They had fun, and sometimes we would talk a bit.

One thing that we did promise them, and this is the third part of our research process (first was the self-administered questions, and then there were the group interviews); after we were completely finished with our research we would sit down with as many of them from the entire school who wanted to in order to answer their questions for as long as they had questions. Sometimes that session would last two or three hours. We held these ending sessions in the home of one of the teachers, or some other accessible place. We made sure that they could leave their dormitories in order to come. After we had gotten

all of our information, we would answer a lot of questions that they had about their futures, educational opportunities, job opportunities, birth control, etc. They had a very, very wide range of questions.

Our research process included: Questionnaires, group interviews, and ending discussions. I am focusing particularly on the group interviewing because it's such an unconventional way of going about interviewing. What would happen when we started asking the questions? As we posed a question, we would first get a few very tentative comments and then the discussion would heat up. We would find them arguing or adding on to each others comments. Sometimes the answer to a particular question would be an immediate consensus because they would have complete agreement on that particular issue. But where it was a tough question, where there was no consensus, they would really argue seriously, bringing examples from their various experiences: "No, it's like this ... No, she should do this ... No, she should do that." And, it was sometimes a very, very heated discussion. Then sometimes we would end up without agreement, where they would say, "Okay, we've got two positions and there is just no consensus within the group." Sometimes they would work it out and decide on a particular statement that they would be willing to consider as their opinion. For our purposes, the process they were going through was as important as the particular answer that they happened to give. We watched the intensity, we watched the complexity, we were interested in the reasoning behind the positions. We were interested that by virtue of the interaction they pulled analysis and cases out of each other. Had they each been talking one on one to me, individually, I would have gotten a series of individual perspectives. Because they were discussing with each other (in a sense they kept each other honest) they validated each other's responses. If someone said something that was just too far out, we could then find out how extreme it was. How many objections were there to that comment?

On a personal level someone who thought the whole world operated in a particular way and assumed everyone else would agree, would find out she was "out on a limb" and was outside the consensus of the group. There was a great amount of self-discovery that took place in the process. We felt that we had set up a situation in which not only would we learn about them, but they would learn about each other.

Question from audience . . . "Was that also true with all the researchers?"

Yes. The set of researchers that I had with me were all first year university students and they were just a few years beyond the very women we were talking to. So, they were still in the throes of making career decisions. It was really a very homogeneous group. We were all in the same boat. And everyone seemed to sense that commonality and so there was a feeling in which we were all working towards resolving the same issues. We were all women. It would have been very, very different had there been any men included. Everyone seemed quite open about talking about their great difficulties. As an aside . . . one of the real horror stories that we learned about in one of the schools, which is a coeducational school, was that they had a discriminatory eating system (not a cafeteria style, but a sit-down style). The bowls of meat and potatoes, or whatever, would be put in the center, and the boys would take all the meat and distribute it among themselves. The women complained that they weren't getting any protein. They were having great difficulty trying to break down that system. They had complained, but, there was

the question of physical strength as well as learned social patterns and norms. They begged us to take this information back to the Ministry Headquarters: they were not getting proper nutrition because of the way they were being treated in the dining hall. We did collect issues that were a problem on the various campuses and take them back to the Ministry. We did communicate that information.

(Before I go on to the advantages and disadvantages of group interviewing), I will give you a brief summary of the substantive results. You are probably curious about what the women had to say about work and family. 92% said they intended to have children (I'm really not sure about the other 8% because I think its fairly universal that African women expect and want to have children). But, only 87% wanted to be married, and in the open-ended responses to this question (in writing), several of them said that husbands were a necessary evil in order for women to have respectability in the community. They were really interested in having children; husbands just seemed to be a necessary part of that system.

In terms of work - 87% plan to work after marriage. I didn't find that fact surprising because the system expects that once you get educated, you will contribute to the economy at the most sophisticated level possible. I then asked whether if their husbands objected to their working, would they work anyway. 58% said that they would work over their husbands objections. Uganda had begun to develop a model of the so-called "western family" where the wife stayed home and did ceremonial kinds of things and organized the household. Some husbands considered it a status symbol that their wives not work. But, 58% said that even if their husbands had serious objections they would not pay any attention to that, they would work anyway.

85% said that they wanted jobs that required training beyond secondary schools. Of the entire sample, only 15% had mothers who worked outside the home. So they were going to be doing something which was very different from what their mothers were doing. I also asked them what kind of work most women did. Of the high level jobs that required training beyond secondary school, only 42% of them said that women did these kinds of things. So these women really see themselves as innovators. 85% want to do those jobs that require high level kind of training, but only 42% believe that women have ever done that. 43% consider themselves to be doing something that most people do not imagine that women can do. This is very exciting finding.

Question from the audience . . . "What of the secondary schools . . . what ages?"

Well, I haven't referred to ages on purpose because the intake is varied. Probably 60% are in the age group appropriate for 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th grades. But the others were probably a bit older by two, three or four years either because they had repeated a year or because they had gotten a late start, having been needed to do some farming at home. Also, money could be a problem. In Uganda primary and secondary schools cost money, but the university is free if you qualify. Your family could be lacking sufficient funds for a year or two and you might have to drop out. If the crops were bad, you would have to leave off school for a couple of years. So, attendance is not very dependable. I do have an "age" variable in my study, but there's no direct correlation between the year in school and the age.

Question from the audience . . . "Over what time span were you working with this same group of women. I mean, how long did your study take and was it always the same group or were there different groups?"

Well, there were eight schools and we finished all of them within about a two-month period.

Question from the audience . . . "But, they were always the same women in the eight schools. Everytime you went there it was the same group?"

We only went to a school once. For the ones that were outside of Kampala we drove there, did the work and came back. We went through our three stages rapidly. In the Kampala area we went back several days over a couple of weeks period. There was no change in the population during that time.

Question from the audience . . . "But how did you get everyone together at the end of the questions. When was that possible?"

We did that when we finished but everyone did not come. The ending sessions were done separately in each school. Most of these schools are boarding schools by the way. A couple of the Kampala schools were commuter schools, but most Ugandan secondary schools are boarding schools; the students lived there. We stayed in each school for a whole week; we became part of the community of that particular school.

Question from the audience . . . "So they would be able to ask any questions about the research and what your findings were, after that whole process and before you left?"

Yes. But, we were able to talk to them about whatever they wanted to know from their school and our experiences. We did not tell them about other schools.

Here is some sample questions that we used in the group interviewing. These are some of the hypothetical situations:

1. "Mary is a secondary school teacher at Gayaza, which is one of the best women's secondary schools. She has been offered the headmistresship of another school 200 miles away. Her husband has a good job in Kampala and could not find similar work in the new town. Should Mary take the job offer?"

Question from audience . . . "Mary has the same problems in Africa as we have here!"

Yes, it was not too difficult to develop these situations. Women throughout the world share problems. The response to this question was mixed. It may have depended on how assertive and liberated the families were from which the women came. But, they were divided on the issue. There were some that said, "Oh, sure. That's a terrific opportunity." And others that started to say, "Oh . . . Well . . ." In following my own university students who are now out in the field, they say "yes" and go to work. When it's a career opportunity like that, they don't wait around worrying about the problems. They generally have a lot of difficulty managing their husbands and don't see their husbands as their highest

priority. They do take their children with them. They are ready for any good opportunity.

2. "Anna is a university student who is studying to be a secondary school geography teacher. One of her professors asks her if she would like to change to a program leading to administration. Anna knows that administrators have to organize the work of other people, and she isn't sure that women have ever been government administrators. Should Anna take a chance and change to administration?"

Now there are all plenty of women secondary school teachers. But, not very many women administrators. They all said "yes". At this stage there were no husbands to be considered. Any kind of opportunity for something exciting is seen in a positive light. This was still at a formative stage . . . and they were willing to go for any kind of exciting opportunity that presents itself.

3. "Christina is happily married and has three children. She has been working in the administrative headquarters as a desk officer for four years. She has the opportunity to go to the field as a district administrator. Christina knows that the work is long, difficult and would even put her at physical risk. On the other hand, this is the only career path for moving up in the administration and becoming a leader in the government. Should she try field administration?"

Most of the women said "yes". There were some that had serious reservations about taking this kind of chance because after all she already did have a moderately big position. She was safe in the city. They were genuinely worried about what it would be like in the field. So there were definitely some people who were a little worried about that. There are even some men who fear of work in the field, so it's not just a female characteristic.

The last one I have here is:

4. "Deborah's husband has been drinking all their earnings. She hears that she can open a separate account at the bank for her earnings, thereby denying her husband ready access to her earnings. She knows that he will be angry, but she's afraid that she won't be able to pay the rent and buy food and clothing for the children. Should Deborah open her own account?"

For a long time women could not have separate bank accounts in Uganda because even though they did most of the work, the husbands were supposed to control the money. In fact, there were some women who did not know that women could have their own accounts; we actually were bringing new information to them. They all said "yes". The welfare of their children was more important than an angry husband. This is actually quite a typical problem; husbands wasting the money. Women have much keener sense of taking care of their families. So, opening a separate account was unanimous, or nearly so.

About the advantages and disadvantages of this method of group interviewing. The advantages to summarize are: (1) we got explanation as well as description. (2) Because of the richness of the discussion we had a measure of external validity because we were able to see within groups how much a particular opinion was shared. That gave us some idea of how much that opinion might be shared in

the wider population. It still isn't the same as sampling everyone, but it's better than just talking to individual people. We saw the debate. (3) We saw intersubjectivity in action. Intersubjectivity is a connection between objectivity and subjectivity. We had groups of women each presenting their own perceptions and then through the process of sharing those perceptions we developed an image of what was true. Only through that group process can you watch the formation of intersubjectivity. (4) We also, I think, saw the development of the women themselves as active participants because they had some control in the groups. Early on in the process they saw that they could direct the discussion and this made them more assertive in the process. (5) And, I think (but there isn't a control for this) the situation probably made them more creative and more spontaneous because they saw that they could participate in the way the discussion was going. (6) It is also an example of inductive logic in a research situation. By that I mean that they each brought cases and examples for the particular situation and as they put those together and created a consensus, they were building a conclusion; they were able to watch inductive logic process in action. I hope that the process actually contributed to their analytical skills. I don't know. I'm an optimist. (7) Finally, I think, they gained as individuals from the process. They gained a sense that they were sharing problems. Uganda is a very divided society; divided on religion; divided on tribe; divided on social class. But when we had these discussions, we were discussing "universals" in their lives. They discovered that they all were dealing with these issues; it was a unifying kind of force. It created an identity among them. I don't want to stress this too far - I'd like to say it created long-term solidarity.